DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 854 HE 024 743

AUTHOR Paulsen, Michael B.
TITLE College Choice: Understanding Student Enrollment Behavior. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION Association for the Study of Higher Education.; ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Washington, D.C.; George Washington Univ., Washington, DC. School of Education and Human Development.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-HE-90-6
PUB DATE May 90
CONTRACT RI88062014
NOTE 3p.; For full report, see HE 024 744.
AVAILABLE FROM ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports, ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, One Dupont Circle, Suite 630, Washington, DC 20036-1183. ($1.00 each).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Applicants; *College Choice; Declining Enrollment; Economic Climate; Enrollment; *Enrollment Influences; Enrollment Trends; *Higher Education; *Institutional Characteristics; Student Characteristics; *Student Recruitment
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes in a question and answer format a full length report of the same title. It addresses trends in college student enrollment patterns with an emphasis on behavior underlying student choice of college. Demographic changes and cuts in important sources of student financial aid brought significant enrollment declines to higher education in the 1980s. Colleges responded by engaging in market oriented activities intended to attract students while students became more like academic shoppers, preferring vocational, occupational, or professional courses over courses in the traditional arts and sciences. Understanding these student choice behaviors are important so that institutions can enhance their enrollment planning activities and student marketing and recruitment activities. Researchers in psychology, sociology, and economics have done most studies of enrollment behavior. Enrollment effects of changes in the economy are often complex with different results for different levels of society. Understanding individual enrollment behavior can help enrollment managers tailor and target their college's marketing mix of programs, prices, and places. The college search and application phase is important because it is in this phase that students eliminate most colleges from consideration. Colleges can better manage enrollment in the selection and attendance phase by recruiting students consistent with the characteristics of the college or by adjusting the college characteristics to match the characteristics of the desired students. (Included are 9 references.) (Author/JB)

ERIC DIGEST

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

MAY 1990
EDO-HE-90-6

ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education The George Washington University One Dupont Circle, Suite 630 Washington, DC 20036

# College Choice: Understanding Student Enrollment Behavior

by Michael B. Paulsen

ED333854

In the 1970s, projections clearly indicated that the traditional college student cohort of 18 to 21 year olds would fall by 25 percent between the late 1970s and the early 1990s (WICHE 1988). Colleges unhappily watched the number of traditional college-level jobs per college graduate decrease. Potential students became consumers and flexed their newfound marketplace muscle. Fears of cutbacks in important sources of student financial aid intensified as the 1970s came to an end. The higher education marketplace was changing in many ways which threatened to produce significant enrollment declines.

## How Did Colleges Respond to Enrollment-Threatening Changes?

Faced with prospects of reduced enrollments, budget deficits, retrenchment, and institutional closings, many administrators paid more attention to enrollment maintenance, became more responsive to market interests and more aware of the increasingly competitive nature of student recruitment, and began to engage in market-oriented activities intended to attract students. Each year's students became more like academic shoppers or consumers (Riesman 1980), preferring vocational, occupational, or professional courses over courses in the traditional arts and sciences.

## Why Is Knowledge of College Choice Behavior Important?

From the 1970s through today, colleges have developed two basic market-oriented desires. They want to plan and forecast their enrollment more effectively, and they want to influence the college-going decision-making process of desired students. The study of college choice behavior is of great practical importance for administrators in promoting greater effectiveness in these two areas. The study of enrollment behavior of students in groups (macro-level) indicates how changes in environmental and institutional characteristics affect an institution's total enrollment. The study of the college choice behavior of individual students (micro-level) indicates the ways in which environmental, institutional, and student characteristics affect a student's choices about whether or not to attend college and which college to attend. It is the results of these studies which provide the fundamental knowledge bases for enhancing the effectiveness of enrollment planning activities and student marketing and recruitment activities (Hossler 1984).

HE024743

## What Are the Conceptual Bases for the Study of College Choice Behavior?

Most studies of student enrollment behavior have been conducted by educational researchers with backgrounds in either psychology, sociology, or economics. These disciplines offer somewhat different perspectives and conceptual foundations for the study of college choice behavior. Psychologists emphasize the psychological environment, or climate, of an institution, its impact on students, and student-institution fit (Astin 1965). Sociologists view the formation of college-going aspirations as part of a general status attainment process. Economists view college attendance decisions as a form of investment-like decision-making behavior (Jackson 1978).

## Why Is It Important to Understand What Determines Enrollment at Different Levels?

The enrollment effects of changes in the economy often are unexpectedly complex, but important to understand. Positive enrollment effects can result from increasing job market opportunities for college graduates or from decreasing job market opportunities for noncollege graduates. General economic recessions usually reduce job market opportunities in positions traditionally held by noncollege graduates more than they do opportunities in positions normally held by college graduates. As a result, general economic recessions can stimulate enrollment by making job market opportunities for college graduates relatively superior to those for noncollege graduates. Also, when conditions in the college job market deteriorate, enrollment tends to favor colleges emphasizing professional or vocational curricula. However, when college job market opportunities increase, enrollment tends to favor colleges emphasizing traditional liberal arts and sciences curricula (Paulsen and Pogue 1988).

## Why Is It Important to Understand Individual Enrollment Behavior?

The greatest contribution of the micro-level studies of college choice behavior is their ability to estimate the effects of institutional and student characteristics on the probability that a particular individual will choose a particular college.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Understanding the enrollment effects of such characteristics can help enrollment managers tailor and target their college's marketing mix of programs, prices, and places to those students possessing characteristics similar to those who most often matriculate at their college.

Some enrollment effects of the interaction between student and institutional characteristics are especially important to understand. For example, student responsiveness to college cost decreases as income and academic ability rise, and vice versa. Also, recent research has shown that students are now about equally sensitive to changes in the major parts of college cost: tuition, room and board, commuting, financial aid, and foregone earnings (Manski and Wise 1983).

## Why Is the College Search and Application Phase So Important?

It is in this phase of the choice process that most colleges are eliminated from consideration by students. Of course, potential students exist in substantial quantities across all levels of socioeconomic backgrounds and academic abilities. Therefore they will preselect institutional categories across all levels of institutional selectivity, cost, distance from home, and so on. Each college must work hard to find appropriate matches between the characteristics of the students it seeks to recruit and the characteristics of its own institution. Each college must work hard to be included in the choices of such students.

## How Can an Institution More Effectively Manage Enrollment in the Selection and Attendance Phase?

Individual institutions engaged in academic market research usually study student enrollment behavior in this final phase (Litten et al. 1983). Analysis of data collected from admitted student questionnaires on student characteristics and ratings of the characteristics of a college and its competitors allows a college to identify its competitors, assess its image, determine its market position compared to competitors, identify what determines matriculation choices, and identify student market segments by enrollment yield.

Given the availability of such information, an institution has two broad enrollment strategies:

- recruit students with characteristics consistent with the characteristics of the college;
- adjust the characteristics of the college so they are more consistent with the student characteristics desired by the college.

## Selected References


Astin, Alexander. 1965. Who Goes Where to College? Chicago: Science Research Associates.

Hossler, Don. 1984. Enrollment Management: An Integrated Approach. New York: College Entrance Examination Board.

Ihlanfeldt, William. 1980. Achieving Optimal Enrollments and Tuition Revenues: A Guide to Modern Methods of Market Research, Student Recruitment, and Institutional Pricing. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Jackson, Gregory A. 1978. "Financial Aid and Student Enrollment." Journal of Higher Education 49: 548-574.

Litten, Larry H., Daniel Sullivan, and David L. Brodigan. 1983. Applying Market Research in College Admissions. New York: College Entrance Examination Board.

Manski, Charles F., and David A. Wise. 1983. College Choice in America. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Paulsen, Michael B., and Thomas F. Pogue. 1988. "Higher Education Enrollment: The Interaction of Labor Market Conditions, Curriculum, and Selectivity." Economics of Education Review 7(3): 275-290.

Riesman, David. 1980. On Higher Education: The Academic Enterprise in an Era of Rising Student Consumerism. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, et. al. 1988. High School Graduates: Projections by State, 1986 to 2004. Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.



This ERIC digest is based on a new full-length report in the *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report* series, prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education in cooperation with the Association for the Study of Higher Education, and published by the School of Education at the **George Washington University.** Each report is a definitive review of the literature and institutional practice on a single critical issue. Many administrators subscribe to the series and circulate reports to staff and faculty committees with responsibility in a report's topic area. Reports are available through subscriptions for $80 per year ($90 outside the U.S.). Subscriptions begin with Report 1 and conclude with Report 8 of the current series year. Single copies, at $17 each, are available from: *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports,* **The George Washington University,** One Dupont Circle, Suite 630, Washington, DC 20036-1183. Or phone (202) 296-2597.

This publication was partially prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED RI-88-062014. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the department.


The George Washington University
WASHINGTON DC